

# A mediator's view from here: vision, strategy and other elements of peacemaking

Alvaro de Soto

**A**s I leave the UN after 25 years, my colleagues at the OSLO forum have asked me to share some thoughts on the role of vision in a peacemaker's work. The thoughts below have inevitably strayed into strategy and some other elements in connection with the peace processes I have known. Perhaps they could serve as a starting point for a useful discussion.

During the El Salvador negotiations I was accused of having no strategy, and, when I developed one for all to see, of needlessly prolonging the negotiation and postponing the end of fighting by shooting for the moon. In the Cyprus negotiations, I was blamed for not allowing the parties to negotiate, and of seeking to impose a settlement on the parties. In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict the conventional wisdom is that everybody knows what the solution consists of, and it's just a matter of getting there – as Shimon Peres puts it, “yes, there is light at the end of the tunnel. The problem is that there is no tunnel.” Go figure. I am not at all sure whether my take on the requirement for a vision or lack thereof is of universal application, but I here set forth my comments.

To begin, it should be stated that there are cases in which a vision – at least on the part of the mediator – can be dispensed with. For example, any mediator worth his salt will realize when a conflict simply does not lend itself to solution, at least at that particular moment, or perhaps permanently. Absent a major change in the context that will open up possibilities previously not available, such a conflict can at best be *managed*, i.e. understandings can be reached, tacitly or explicitly, under which the conflict will be contained in a box of its own – for example, since the late 1990s Greece and Turkey have by and large agreed not to allow the deadlock on Cyprus to sour the rapprochement between them. Or, measures can be agreed to soften the impact of a conflict – the agreements on exchanges of prisoners, non-bombardment of purely civilian targets, and the establishment of a mechanism to be triggered in cases of accusations of use of chemical weapons, brokered by UNSG Pérez de Cuéllar during the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, is a case in point.

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Perhaps truces for certain purposes – e.g. massive vaccinations – can be arranged as confidence-building measures during wartime. These would be palliating measures while awaiting the necessary change in the context. The classic rationale behind peacekeeping is to interpose neutral forces to provide a circuit-breaker, political space and breathing time to address the underlying issues; unfortunately there is no assurance that this breathing space necessarily comes accompanied with the conditions needed to broker a settlement; Cyprus and the Western Sahara are well-known examples to the contrary. My point is that in such cases the question of vision is largely superfluous.

The need for vision arises, if at all, in cases where conditions are given for looking beyond a mere ceasefire and pursuing a comprehensive solution – one that encompasses the full range of issues that need to be addressed so as to ensure that it is *durable* over the long term – that is, where a conflict is *ripe for resolution*. I will therefore not deal with conflict-management situations.

As a general proposition, a mediator should aspire to develop, as early as possible in a negotiation, for his own reference, a broad vision of the overall solution to a conflict, as well as a strategy to bring it about. The purpose would be to establish a frame of reference and strategic goal for himself. Into this opening declaration I have thrown some heavy, carefully chosen qualifiers – *aspire* and *develop* and *broad* and *frame of reference* – because my byword is that a mediator should approach his mission with humility and respect. He should certainly not arrive with a ready-made, shrink-wrapped formula: as a humble Donald Rumsfeld might have said, you work with the conflict you have before you rather than one you would prefer to have.

There will surely be players, external and internal, who will volunteer advice to a mediator who is about to take on his task. A mediator should listen to such advice politely, but he should reserve his judgement until he hears out the parties and all essential stakeholders and players, mainly internal, and only then attempt to draw his own conclusions as to what is feasible and desirable. He should also prepare to be disappointed if this proves elusive or unattainable. In any case, he should keep his ideas to general outlines so as to be open to adjust them as the process unfolds. A strategy of how to get to the desired goal, in terms of marshalling forces and building a network of incentives and disincentives, is as important as the vision itself, if not more so.

When we speak of vision we are, of course, referring to a concept that arises in the eye of someone's mind. The question is, therefore: *whose* mind, or, more precisely, *whose vision*?

Probably not the parties'. It is safe to assume that if adversaries have entered into conflict it is because they have, at the very least, clashing conceptions of what their relationship should consist of, or a serious grievance which has pitted them against each other on the battlefield. It follows that one party's vision of the outcome of the conflict will almost inevitably diverge from the other's. This is not fertile terrain to plough in search of a common vision. If anything, the purpose

of a negotiation between parties to a conflict, and of the intervention of a mediator, is to forge such a common vision where one doesn't exist to start with.

Beware, however, of putting the "vision question" as an item for negotiation or even discussion, or of entertaining proposals by one party to that effect. I have seen such initiatives being used shamelessly as a device to sabotage the conduct of serious business. A common vision can and should emerge only gradually, and most frequently it will begin to take shape at its own pace and should be allowed to consolidate. In fact, trying to pin it down could have a deleterious effect, if only because it adds one more layer of questions to be negotiated.

A key element in the solution of a conflict should be that it will withstand the test of time, i.e. that it will be *durable*. There is an ongoing debate about how to ensure that once the guns fall silent, it will not be a mere reprieve during which they are squirreled away in caches only to be dusted off and cocked for the next round of fighting. Rather, durability should be the result of a negotiated solution which addresses perceived as well as underlying issues and provides for channels for the resolution of future disputes that make it unnecessary or unappetizing to resort to arms, thus allowing for the monopoly of firepower to be placed in trustworthy security bodies. Durability is in fact the central goal of what we have come to call *post-conflict peace-building*: ensuring that conflict will not recur.

Surely one factor in averting recurrence of conflict is *ownership*. It seems to me that the chances of durability can improve significantly if the results emerge, or are at least seen to emerge, from the parties in conflict rather than from the outside. That would argue for mediators who possess the virtue – admittedly rare in this line of work – of self-effacement.

The problem, of course, is that all too often a common vision of how a conflict should be solved begins to emerge only as endgame approaches, by which time the question is moot. In fact, there is a certain category of conflicts where the seemingly academic question of *what* and *who* brought it about is precisely one of the battlefields on which it is fought. The former Yugoslavia, Cyprus and the Middle East fall into this category of conflicts; they are examples to which one can apply the alleged Churchillism, "too much history, too little geography". In such cases, a mediator has to go down the perilous path of trying to forge such a common vision and persuading the parties to subscribe to it, all the while presenting it to the constituents of the negotiators, as well as to the world at large, as the result of a negotiation between the parties themselves.

What should be the elements of a vision for the durable solution of a conflict? There is no checklist; Ikea does not have on its shelves a ready-to-assemble kit. There are, of course, certain obvious building blocks – third-party monitoring, internal legitimacy, international support, a seal of approval of the IFIs, institutional reform, etc. The agreement finalizing the conflict must be as rounded out and complete as humanly possible; loose ends or issues left for subsequent negotiation are potential landmines that threaten peacebuilding. In the final analysis a mediator would be well advised to put together the ingredients of the cocktail

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based on a clearheaded assessment of what led to the conflict in the first place. Coming back again to the post-conflict peace-building rule of thumb of avoiding recurrence: the mediator must insist on providing ways to address in the future, without resorting to violence, disputes which led to war in the past. For example, if the central issue was resources, he must ensure that there will be a way to control or allocate them that will be impartial and friction- and abuse-free. If it was exclusionary policies, he should bring about an inclusionary system, and so forth.

Each of my colleagues in peacemaking will, I am sure, disagree with one, the other or all the points that I have made. My observations are based on a combination of the experiences I have had and the lessons that I have drawn and the fact that I was working on behalf of the Secretary-General of the United Nations. Each mediator has his own style and imprint, of course, but a UN mediator comes equipped with a particular specificity and indeed deontology. Others may not have the same constraints and guidelines, which might burden or strengthen them, as the case may be, in the same way. No doubt a mediator acting on behalf of another intergovernmental organization, superpower, middle or indeed small power, or an NGO, will have a specificity of his own, and even a deontology – or, for all I know, they may have neither. But in any case no two will be alike.

Thus a mediator from one such entity might have taken a different approach from the one that I took on Cyprus, though I suspect that he would have made most of the same choices that I did, including the one to press ahead with the referendums in April 2004 while knowing that the UN plan would be rejected by one side.

Another mediator might have settled for a quick fix rather than a thorough, durable solution on El Salvador; he might have been more lenient toward the last-minute attempt to cut a deal on blanket amnesty for those responsible of major misdeeds.

The choice of mediator, like the choice of a surgeon when you are faced with the need to extract something malignant festering inside you, can be rather far-reaching in the sense that it might lead to different results – for better or worse. We all are aware of the bane of any mediation, which is the ability of parties to conflict to play one off against the other. As a by-product of this brief discussion of vision and strategy, therefore, two ideas come to mind: first, perhaps a code of conduct as between would-be mediators would be in order, under which when a mediation is in progress others remain out of the way. Second, perhaps a catalogue of the supply-side would serve to clear the air and show where each stands: wouldn't it be useful for forum-shopping parties to know what they are bargaining for depending on whether they go for an intergovernmental organization or a government or an NGO? ■